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ABSTRACT

Turner's (1980) visual literacy test for high school students and adults was adapted for use with eighth grade students. The new version was limited to questions dealing with motion media, and a half-hour "M.A.S.H." narrative television program was chosen for the focus on television production techniques and the narrative elements of the program. Revisions in language level were made and the instrument was pilot tested with five classes of eighth grade students using a presentation-quiz discussion format. In general, Turner's 1980 instrument questions were much too long and difficult for most of the students, and questions developed by the researcher were initially too open ended. The instrument was further refined utilizing the teacher and researcher, visual literacy literature, and the pilot data. Information about utilizing a naturalistic approach to investigating visual literacy was generated from the project, and the possibilities for further research were explored and extended. Appendices include the visual literacy test in both its preliminary and secondary versions. Thirteen references are listed. (LMM)

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The Impact of Television Literacy

An Investigation of

Narrative and Television Comprehension

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The Impact of Television Literacy:

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Background and Introduction

Visual communications inundate today's students, and the ability to interpret and utilize these messages is important to the learning process. While educators study the effect that commercial television and film has had on children, several national groups seriously pursue the goal of creating a more technologically aware and media literate society, in an attempt to nullify the perceived negative effects of viewing television and film (Kahn, 1979, Potter, 1982). The growth of film and television study has lead to the development of both research and application of programs designed to enhance what many are calling "visual literacy".

Sharing many elements with media appreciation or film criticism, visual literacy has been variously defined, and theoretical principles of visual literacy are being developed (Hortin, 1980). Visual literacy is: the ability to process elements and interpret visual messages; the ability to understand and appreciate the content and purpose of any image, the structural and aesthetic composition in visual communication (Esdale and Robinson, 1981). An understanding of the structural devices basic to all television and films is one of the main skills in acquiring visual literacy (Foster, 1979).

> "An understanding of how the structural devices of composition, lighting, color, movement, editing, and sound are used to influence audience reactions is the minimal requirement for becoming visually literate.
>
> Students who spend more time watching films and television than they do reading books or sitting in classrooms need to know that films and television are more

than instruments of entertainment, information, and artistic expression - they are powerful media, capable of influencing viewer's thoughts and actions. As a first step toward becoming visually literate, students should therefore learn to analyze the structural devices and production techniques of filmmaking and their ability to affect a viewer's responses." (Foster, 1979, p.12)

Educators are acknowledging the increasing importance of including visual literacy or media competencies in the basic communications skills of students. Many educators have identified the need for visual literacy and have suggested activities to encourage its development (Potter, 1982; Kahn, 1982; England, 1982; Foster, 1979; Sohn, 1978; Logan, 1977). However, most curricular materials suggest little assessment of skills which could establish base line data or allow for the assessment of growth. While visual literacy has been clearly defined, it has been much less clearly investigated. What is the level of visual literacy of students? How can visual literacy be assessed? Can the various visual abilities be differentiated?

Only recently has one standardized assessment of visual literacy skills been developed (Turner, 1979). Turner reported that this test was validated for high school students and adults. While curricular materials have been developed to enhance the viewing skills of elementary school age students, no validated assessment has been made available for that age group. The purpose of this study was to refine this standardized visual literacy assessment (Turner, 1979) to allow its utilization with a younger audience. Through a pilot use of this new assessment, the visual literacy of students was evaluated to obtain data for further development of both this instrument and its utilization. Some naturalistic inquiry methods were also piloted.

Methods

Participants

All the students in five eighth grade speech communication classes in a small town in Illinois were selected, a total of approximately 75 students. Parental consent forms were sent home and 12 students were either denied permission or were absent days of the study.

Materials

Turner's (1980) instrument was adapted for use with eighth grade students. The vocabulary and reading level were checked by a reading specialist. The instrument was limited to those questions dealing with motion media, in an attempt to both shorten and focus the instrument on television-related items.

A half-hour narrative television program was chosen for the focus of discussion on structional devices of television, and the narrative elements of the program. All the students were asked to list their five favorite programs. "M.A.S.H." was chosen as the most watched and most popular choice.

Procedures

The Turner instrument was refined utilizing a reading specialist and a classroom teacher to serve as a review panel, checking both the language level and the content of all the items. Ten items were selected to represent various elements of visual ability. Questions dealing with student comprehension of the narrative elements were also written and checked by the panel. A group of personal questions were added (sex, viewing habits and preferences, reading habits) to provide data on student's viewing and production of media. (See Appendix I)

The instrument was pilot tested utilizing a presentation-quiz-discussion format familiar to students as normal classroom procedures. In each class, the investigator was introduced, explained the procedures, and distributed the instruments. Students responded first to the visual literacy questions. A

videotaped episode of "Mash" was shown on the school's equipment, and students then completed the questions. The last questions (32-38) were used as a basis for discussion which the investigator lead, audio taping all activities.

Results

The results of the pilot testing of the instrument are reflected in the post-pilot version attached to this report (Appendix II). In general, Turner's (1980) instrument was found to be much too long, difficult, and beyond the abilities of most eighth grade students. The questions developed by the researcher (#11-end) were too open-ended, and resulted in extremely general, "non-answer" responses which indicated that students were not certain what was being asked. Questions which elicited appropriate and more clear responses were retained; others were eliminated or altered. Teacher researcher observations were also incorporated into the post-pilot instrument.

The data actually collected from the instrument dealt with 1) the pilot nature of instrument development and 2) the actual responses students provided.

Instrument Pilot

The standardized test questions from Turner were found to be much too difficult for the students. For each question, almost half the students responded "I don't know" or "I don't understand the questions." Using student discussion, and questions and responses from the instrument, new visual literacy questions were developed which focused on the production techniques used to present the narrative. (Appendix II)

Questions about the narrative elements of plot, setting, characters, and conflict were clarified and forced choices were developed for some. Some knowledge of student's comprehension of narrative elements could be extrapolated to their visual literacy ability, but questions involving the two were not pilot-tested. Many students did not finish the instrument.

Student Responses

Students did not know the correct answers to the Turner instrument questions. No more than 10% of those responding to a choice selected the correct response (number 1-10).

Personal data was also collected. Of the 64 students, 38 were boys, 26 were girls. They saw an average of one-two films per week in school, less than two per month at a theater, and over five per week on television. They almost all owned a camera, and over 85% knew how to take photographs. Most (75% and 90%) had no movie or video camera at home; 88% did not know how to use either one. Over 50% had studied TV in school. Reading habits varied widely; hours per week ranged from 0-20, with an average of 6 hours. Over a third of the students (38%) watched two-three hours per day of television, but 15% watched over six hours per day and 20% watched less than one hour.

This data could be utilized to formulate a media familiarity profile for students, and these questions were retained.

Discussion

Much information was gained from this project. The primary focus of the activity was the development of an acceptable instrument to assess the visual literacy of pre-high school students. However, the larger question addressed the actual methodology and research instruments utilized in investigating visual literacy. While attention was directed at the development, pilot-testing, and refinement of an assessment instrument, the results involved more than the refinement of the instrument.

The pilot test of the assessment involved employing participant - observation methods of data collection. The researcher was directly involved in guiding students and observing their behavior while testing the instrument. Because of this direct involvement, the researcher had an opportunity to interact with students, observe the questions raised, and observe reaction to

problems students encountered with their tasks. Consequently, while gaining excellent data pertaining to the development of an assessment instrument, the researcher also gained experience with observation methodology and the problems of investigating or researching visual literacy.

Proponents of visual literacy research have addressed themselves to some of the problems involved in the investigation of visual literacy factors. Cochran (1983) has challenged researchers to consider several important factors in future research. Among these was the idea that naturalistic inquiry methods should be utilized to investigate individual meaning derived from visuals. An interdisciplinary approach was recommended, and research on topics such as the developmental levels of visual literacy skill attainment was suggested.

With this challenge to consider naturalistic inquiry and to investigate levels of visual literacy attainment, the researcher focused not only on the development of an assessment instrument but also on the methods of collecting data which could accompany and actually strengthen the utilization of the instrument.

In addition to the new instrument, the project derived much information on naturalistic inquiry. While students were unable to correctly answer "visual literacy" conceptual questions, they were very able to discuss film and television elements. The students revealed, through class discussion and the open-ended questionnaire, a varied understanding of television production elements such as laugh tracks, multiple camera shooting, backdrops, sets, lighting, and sound effects. They could also delineate areas of literary understanding from television, including such elements as plot, characterization, setting, climax, and theme. Overall, students were enthusiastic and cooperative, and many were interested in the results of the investigation. They revealed an active involvement with television and film, and were interested in better understanding the media.

This pilot revealed that another researcher's validated test was inappropriate to the task. The observed discussion revealed a great deal more about student's visual comprehension; the "situation in which people use visual materials" (Cochran et.al. 1980) was rich in information not available from the "test." While the instrument had been validated, it was not clear and not usable.

The richest responses were verbal and were recorded for further study. Kerr (1983) recommended that guidelines be developed for the structuring and categorizing of a mass of such data. Perhaps the categories provided on the new version of the instrument would facilitate successful categorization of interview or discussion data. Guba (1981) has recommended several methods to enhance the trustworthiness and especially the dependability and transferability of data collected in naturalistic inquiry. The results of this pilot suggested that triangulation of technique, overlap (repeated) methods, and an audit trail would all be possible improvements in the method of data collection. (Guba, 1980) Results did not indicate that a better written instrument for individual response would provide all the data desired.

Experimental methods could be used to investigate some of the questions addressed in this study. Messaris (1975) has used one such design to investigate viewer's styles of film interpretation (real or created) as they relate to the viewer's familiarity with film study, only to find that "a viewer's past experience does not appear to deflect interpretational styles...." (pg. 16) It would seem that more work, both experimental and naturalistic inquiry, is needed.

Summary

In conclusion, the following tasks were completed: an instrument was redeveloped for a younger audience; the new version was pilot-tested using five classes of eighth graders at Sycamore Jr. High School; the instrument was

further refined utilizing the teacher and researcher, visual literacy literature, and the pilot data. In addition, information about utilizing a naturalistic approach to investigating visual literacy was generated from the project, and the possibilities for future research were explored and extended.

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Appendix I

VISUAL LITERACY TEST

Try to answer these 10 film/TV questions. If you do not understand the question, please write ? in the margin.

1. Depth is created in TV by using _____.

   a. straight on filming
   b. off side angles
   c. rear view filming
   d. angle on angle positions

2. Which of the following techniques is not used to connect sections of shows to create meaning?

   a. shots are put together into scenes
   b. use of cut shots one after another
   c. sequence of establishing, medium and short shots
   d. none of these

3. Tradition creates rules for media use. We have even developed a language of cartoons. A series of small smoke puff circles instead of a tail pointing to the character indicates _____.

   a. thoughts
   b. dreams
   c. both a and b
   d. swearing

4. How is the sound recorded for a fight on TV?

   a. synchronously - at the same time the fight is recorded
   b. dubbed in afterwards
   c. I do not know

5. _____ are colors that are used in backgrounds.

   a. red, green, blue
   b. red, yellow, orange
   c. violet, dark green, blue
   d. black, violet, green

6. Most filming uses the technique of basic shot sequence. That sequence is_____.

   a. close up, cut-away, long shot
   b. fade in, close up, fade out
   c. long, medium, close-up
   d. zoom, close-up fade

7. It is as important to expand as to compress time in film. To do so, you would use _____.

   a. cut-ins to specific action
   b. film at greater speed
   c. time lapse photography
   d. both a and b

8. Film techniques like zoom shots or fast editing work best when _____

   a. not used too often
   b. varied
   c. the audience recognizes them
   d. the audience is not aware of them
   e. other reason

9. The film "Fiddler on the Roof" was shot almost entirely with the camera lens covered by an ordinary nylon stocking. Why would you not use this procedure?

   a. to enhance colors
   b. to diminish the sharp focus
   c. to establish mood
   d. to make the film warm and earthy
   e. I do not know

10. Time in film is both shortened and expanded. How would you show a boat steaming up a river for 20 minutes and docking if you wanted to make it happen in a few minutes of film?

   a. shot of boat, cut-away to wharf and back to boat
   b. slow the filming to speed up actual action
   c. time lapse filming
   d. none of these
   e. I do not know

Please try to answer each question honestly, to the best of your ability.

1. I thought this show was:

   very good good OK not very good

2. I understand this show:

   very well well not very well not at all

3. When I came to class, before viewing this show, I felt:

   happy fairly happy not very happy (unhappy) depressed

4. After watching this show, I felt:

   happier the same less happy sad depressed

5. Describe each of the main characters of this show--who was the show about?

6. What was the plot of this film? What happens, briefly? From whose point of view do we see the story? Who is telling the story?

7. Where and when does this story take place? What clues do you see to help you?

8. What was your favorite part or scene? Why? What was your least favorite, and why? Describe each as clearly as you can.

9. Is there one scene that remains in your mind? Describe it.

10. a. What was the mood of this show? How did the show make you feel?

    b. What emotion or mood do you think the show's producers wanted you, the audience, to feel? Did they succeed?

11. Did you like the sound track--the music? What effect did the music have?

12. Did the characters seem real to you? Why, or why not?

13. Can you describe anything about how the show was put together? Were any important times left out? Did time seem to move quickly or slowly?

14. Did anything about the show bother you? Did you like the show? Did it "work" as a story for you?

15. My age is _____.

16. I am male _____ female_____.

17. I live:

    in town outside of town on a farm

18. How many films do you see in school, in all of your classes?

    1 or more per week about 1-2 a month less than 1 a month

19. How many films do you see outside of school?

    at any theater, how many per month? less than 1-2 3-4 5 or more

    at home, on TV per week? 0 1-? 3-4 5 or more

20. How much TV do you usually view?

    less than 1 hour per day 4-5 hours per day

    2-3 hours per day 6 or more hours per day

21. Do you have a camera at home? yes no

    What kind? _____

    Do you know how to take photographs? yes no

    Do you often take photographs? yes no

22. Do have a movie camera at home? yes no

    Do you often take movies? yes no

23. Do you have a video camera at home?
Do you know how to use it?
Do you often use it?

24. Have you studied film making in any class? yes no
which one(s) _____

25. Have you studied TV production in any class? yes no

26. Do you like watching films in school? yes no
Why?

27. Do you like watching videotapes (TV) in school? yes no
Why?

Which do you like better? Why?

28. Do you play video games at home? yes no
How many hours per week?

29. Do you play video games at arcades? yes no
How many hours per week?

30. Do you watch TV at home with lights on or off?

31. How much do you read outside of school? _____ hours per week?
Books? _____ hours per week? Magazines? _____ hours per week
Newspapers? _____ hours per week?

32. How do you feel when you watch TV at home?

33. Why do you watch TV?

34. How do you know when the "climax" of a TV story takes place? Are there clues?

35. How do you know when the funny parts of a TV story take place? Are there clues?

36. Can you define: shot -

edit -

zoom in -

pan -

37. Did you notice anything about the lighting in this show?

38. Anything else you would like to comment on?

Any questions you would like to ask?

Appendix II

(New Version)

VISUAL LITERACY TEST

Please try to answer each question honestly, to the best of your ability. If you do not understand the question, please write a ? in the margin.

1. I thought this show was:

   very good good OK not very good

2. I understood this show:

   very well well not very well not at all

3. When I came to class, before viewing this show, I felt:

   happy fairly happy not very happy (unhappy) depressed

4. My mood after seeing the show was:

   happier the same less happy sad depressed

5. The main character was:
   (name choices)
   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.

6. The other characters were:
   (name choices)
   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.

7. The following events may or may not have been parts of the plot of this show. Place numbers in front of these in the order they occured. Cross out any that did not occur.

   1. 5. 9.
   2. 6. 10.
   3. 7.
   4. 8.

8. This story (show) took place in:

   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.

9. One clue to show this place was:

   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.

10. Is there one scene that remains in your mind? Describe it.

11. What emotion or mood do you think the show's producers wanted you, the audience, to feel?

a.
b.
c.
d.
e.

12. Can you recall music or sound effects from the show? If yes what effect did the music have?

___Yes
___No

13. Did the characters seem real to you? Why?

Yes _____ NO _____

14. What color/colors were used the most:

a.
b.
c.
d.
e.

15. My age is _____.

16. I am Male _____ female _____.

17. I live:

in town outside of town on a farm

18. How many films do you see in school, in all of your classes?

1 or more per week about 1-2 a month less than 1 a month

19. How many films do you see outside of school?

at any theater, how many per month? less than 1-2 3-4 5 or more

at home, on TV per week? 0 1-2 3-4 5 or more

20. How much TV do you usually view?

less than 1 hour per day 4-5 hours per day

2-3 hours per day 6 or more hours a day

21. Do you have a camera at home? yes no

What kind? _____

Do you know how to take photographs? yes no

Do you often take photographs? yes no

22. Do you have a movie camera at home? yes no
    Do you often take movies? yes no

23. Do you have a video camera at home? yes no
    Do you know how to use it? yes no
    Do you often use it? yes no

24. Have you studied film making in any class? yes no
    which one(s) _____

25. Have you studied TV production in any class? yes no

26. Do you like watching films in school? yes no
    Why?

27. Do you like watching videotapes (TV) in school? yes no
    Why?

    Which do you like better? Why?

28. Do you play video games at home? yes no
    How many hours per week?

29. So you play video games at arcades? yes no
    How many hours per week?

30. Do you watch TV at home with lights on or off?

31. How much do you read outside of school? _____ hours per week?
    Books? _____ hours per week? Magazines? _____ hours per week?
    Newspaper? _____ hours per week?

32. How do you feel when you watch TV at home?

33. Why do you watch TV?

34. How do you know when the "climax" of a TV story takes place? Are there clues?

35. How do you know when the funny parts of a TV story take place? Are there clues?

36. Can you define: shot -

edit -

zoom in -

pan

37. Did you notice anything about the lighting in this show? What?

38. Anything else you would like to comment on?

Any questions you would like to ask?